



# DEVELOPMENT HISTORY & HISTORIC PRESERVATION ELEMENT

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## The Early Years

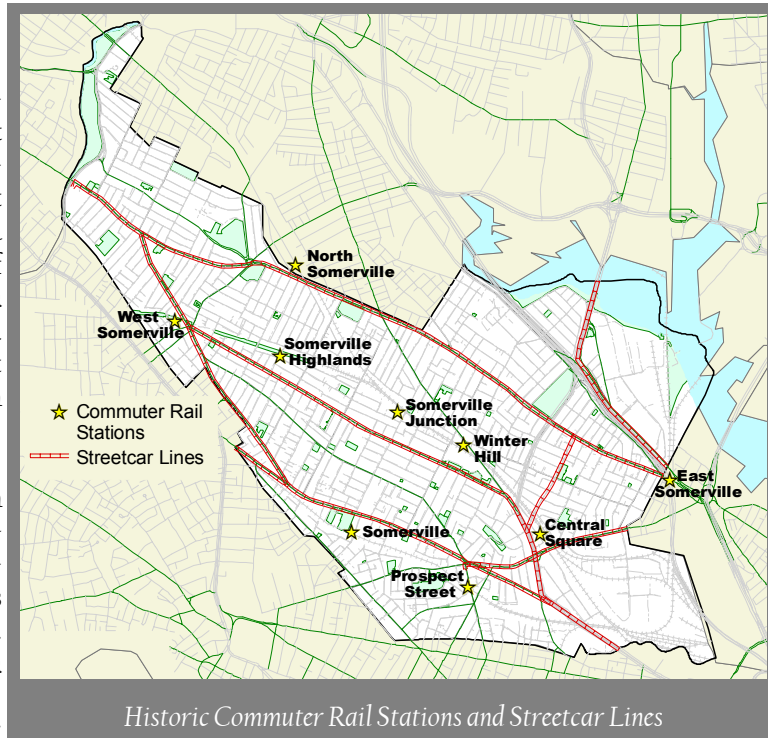
By the early 19th century, Somerville was the location of important turnpike, canal, and railroad corridors to and from Boston. Until that time, Somerville was primarily used as grazing lands by farmers of Charlestown and contained only a few scattered settlements. The area first gained prominence when it served as a critical military position during the Revolution.

The industrial revolution arrived in Somerville, just prior to its incorporation as a city in 1872. Industrialists capitalized on Somerville's natural resources and labor supply. The city quickly became home to a variety of industries, the most prominent including brick-making and meatpacking, in addition to the pre-industrial revolution industries of dairy farms and stone quarries.

Somerville's proximity to Boston, Cambridge, and Charlestown contributed to the development of farmers' markets for agriculture and dairy products as well as for construction material such as pottery, bricks, and slate. Development throughout the United States increased the demand for bricks, one of the City's key industries. In the 1910s, at the peak of production, 24 million bricks per year were made in Somerville.

In addition to industrial growth, the introduction of new streetcar lines and rail stations contributed to Somerville's greatest period of population growth. Between 1870 and 1915, the population multiplied six times.

By the early 1900s, the array of employment opportunities drew workers to Somerville, increasing the demand for housing. The City's population continued to grow and reached its peak during the Second World War with 105,883 people. Closely packed two-family homes and triple-deckers were built through-



Historic Commuter Rail Stations and Streetcar Lines

out the city to house the population, many of whom worked in the wholesale slaughtering and meatpacking industries. This sudden boom in housing production created the dense residential fabric the city is known for; the "city of homes." *Source: Massachusetts Historical Society.*

### *The City of Homes*

The residential building boom continued until the 1940s followed by a period of industrial and population decline that lasted into the 1980s.

*Below: Aerial View (1925) looking southwest at Winter Hill in the foreground and Ten Hills and the Mystic River behind.*





Between 1970 and 1980, Somerville's population declined by 13%. Residents left the City for a number of reasons. The City, which had transportation links to Boston and Cambridge for industrial purposes, was no longer considered well connected to Boston and Cambridge in the 1970s, relative to other suburbs and neighborhoods for commuting purposes. The quality of the housing stock had deteriorated and could not compete with the expanding residential opportunities in the suburbs. The City also suffered from a general deterioration of its infrastructure. During this time, the city lost over 2,000 jobs, due in part to changes in the manufacturing industry as well as the departure of manufacturing, and wholesale businesses in search of less-expensive land. The trend finally began to reverse by the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Commonwealth's transportation plans focused on the expansion of the highway system throughout the Boston metro area. These plans met with stiff resistance from community groups and local officials opposed to the massive land-takings required for highway construction. At the same time, Boston-area residents were beginning to value public transportation as the means for commuting within Boston and from its outlying areas. In 1970 Governor Sargent responded to this opposition by signing a morato-

rium on highway construction within Route 128, and setting up the Boston Transportation Planning Review to examine transportation plans for the Boston area.

The Cambridge City Council worked with the MBTA to consider the extension of the Red Line beyond Harvard Square as an alternative to a proposed highway. The original design for the Red Line extension to Alewife in Cambridge did not include a station in Davis Square. The route was to run from Harvard Square north through Cambridge to Arlington. Somerville residents, businesspeople, and public officials, realizing the economic benefits that a train and bus station would bring to their community, launched a campaign in 1973 to the MBTA requesting that the extension be routed through Davis Square. Somerville was providing 5% of the MBTA's budget, and did not have a subway station within its borders. Somerville residents felt that their transit service was unequal to their contribution. The City's well-coordinated effort was rewarded with the construction of the Davis Square T station.

The City of Somerville used the creation of the new station as a catalyst for revitalizing Davis Square, promoting new commercial development and sponsoring other physical and infrastructure improvements. In 1977, while the Red Line Extension was in the planning stage, the

*An artist's rendering of the proposed Inner Belt Highway (I-695) in Somerville south of Washington Street which was terminated in the 70's.*



Somerville Office of Planning and Community Development (OPCD, predecessor to the OHCD) and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council put together the first Davis Square urban design and business study, to provide a framework for the revitalization plans and the type and extent of development. The advocates wanted Davis Square to retain and build on its traditional urban character. The OPCD commissioned consultants to study potential land uses (including office and retail uses), as well as traffic, parking, and other con-





cerns. With input from the Davis Square Task Force, a group composed of local business owners, residents, and officials, the studies culminated in the Davis Square Action Plan, adopted in 1982. The primary goal of the Plan was to use the new Red Line Station as a cornerstone for redevelopment, strengthening Davis Square as a viable shopping district while preserving the residential character of the neighborhood.  
*Source: Cynthia Nikitin, Project for Public Spaces, Inc.*

#### *The High-Tech Boom Years – Somerville's Revitalization*

The telecommunication and the biotechnology boom of the mid-to-late 1990s significantly contributed to Somerville's revitalization. Similar to the reasons for the housing boom one hundred years earlier, the sudden increase in the number of jobs available in the cities of Somerville, Boston, and particularly Cambridge, as well as the other communities immediately surrounding Somerville, led to a new surge in the demand for housing.

The end of rent control in Cambridge in 1995 coincided with the economic recovery. At the same time, baby boomers and their children began to appreciate the value of living in denser residential neighborhoods, located within

walking distance of neighborhood commercial districts. The walkability of a city became a valued commodity. This combination of change agents, along with a sustained economic boom, caused housing prices to skyrocket in Cambridge and Boston. Homeowners, prospective buyers and renters all looked at Somerville as a lower cost alternative.

Somerville's cultural attributes also became more accessible and attractive: the improvements to Davis Square and the promotion of arts and culture throughout the city helped spawn ArtBeat, the reopening of the Somerville Theater, and a successful Open Studios program.

During this time, manufacturing and other industries continued to leave Somerville for less expensive and more suburban locations. Developers transformed many industrial buildings to other uses, including office, residential and mixed-use buildings, and artist live/work spaces. However, remnant industrial pockets are still found in operation scattered throughout the City's residential and retail districts, in addition to the larger industrial areas such as Assembly Square, Inner Belt and Brickbottom.



Somerville's greatest periods of growth correlate to the quality of transportation. Whether by train or canal during the industrial era in the last century, or by regional highway improvements and T expansion in the 1980s, these improvements appear linked to the growth in population and noticeable increase in economic vitality. Somerville still lags its neighbors Boston and Cambridge in quality of transit service, particularly dedicated right-of-ways and subway options.



## Historic Preservation

Over the past two decades, the City of Somerville, through its Historic Preservation Division of the Office of Housing and Community Development, has made great strides in meeting several statutory goals of the Housing and Community Development Act, as amended, most particularly those goals related to providing a suitable living environment.

This success was accomplished by improving the livability of neighborhoods, increasing access to quality facilities and services, revitalizing deteriorating neighborhoods, and restoring and preserving properties of special value for historic, architectural or aesthetic reasons.

A preservation consultant was hired in 1980 to research, survey and photograph hundreds of potentially historically eligible properties throughout the City. Project research resulted in a book entitled *Beyond the Neck: The History and Development of Somerville, Massachusetts* that identified key properties for historic designation at the local, State, and/or Federal level. Published in 1982, this 160-page book was widely disseminated for public education and feedback, including through local libraries, organizations, and bookstores. Due to its immense popularity and response from the public, the book was updated in 1990 to highlight more recent preservation projects undertaken by the City and private property owners.

The City initiated the Historic Study Committee and ultimately the adoption in 1985 of a local Historic District Ordinance through enabling legislation under Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 40C. The City then established a Somerville Historic Preservation Commission (SHPC) of fourteen (14) voluntary members to administer this Ordinance, and hired a part-time Executive Director to help the City foster the long-term preservation, appreciation, and protection of all significant residential, commercial, religious, and public historic proper-

The mission of the Historic Preservation Division is to provide a wide array of technical assistance, design review, and historical information services on an ongoing basis to owners of historic and historically eligible properties, municipal staff, local schools, government officials, and the general population.

The Staff also provides professional and technical assistance to the Somerville Historic Preservation Commission (SHPC) that was established by the City in 1985 as a fourteen (14) member body to administer the City's Historic Districts. The number of districts which the Commission and its Staff administer have grown over the past 17 years from the initial 105 to currently just over 300 properties. This includes many single building districts, as well as districts comprised of multiple buildings. The Staff and the SHPC review applications for exterior alterations to these designated historic properties and offer constructive and practical advice to the owners.

The Staff reviews demolition permits, conducts Section 106 reviews for publicly funded projects, and in concert with the City Clerk's Office, Inspectional Services, and the Central Library maintains historical records, photographs and other documents for circulation and future reference. The Staff also regularly collaborates on public outreach projects with several State-wide bodies and local organizations dedicated to historic preservation and the revitalization of deteriorated neighborhoods, including the Massachusetts Historical Commission, the Department of Environmental Management, Historic Massachusetts, Inc., the Somerville Old House Organization (SOHO), and the Somerville Museum.

The Staff and the Commission also foster community pride in the City's history and encourage the preservation of Somerville's historic building stock in order to improve the livability of Somerville neighborhoods. To accomplish this mission over the longer term the SHPC is particularly intent upon developing awareness and appreciation of the City's historic assets among the youth of the community.



ties. Since the establishment of the SHPC and Historic Preservation Department the following achievements have been accomplished:

- Since 1985 more than 370 properties fully surveyed and designated "historic" within the City, including 226 properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places, 305 properties designated under local and State historic preservation laws, and 161 properties listed on both the National Register and the State Historic Register. This represents an extraordinary volume of historic properties dispersed throughout a relatively small city of 75,000 residents and 4.2 square miles. Several neighborhood meetings and public hearings were sponsored for input prior to any property designations.
- Administration of the City's Historic Districts Ordinance and associated requirements that involved timely and historical review of applications for exterior property alterations, demolitions, and federally funded projects needing Section 106 compliance. All of these reviews were subject to public scrutiny and comment prior to final action.
- Provision of technical assistance upon request to over 100 private and non-profit owners of historically designated or eligible properties annually, as well as to various municipal departments involved with such properties, including other Division Heads in the Office of Housing and Community Development and the Departments of Public Works, Traffic and Parking, Health, Fire, and Planning. Projects included helping homeowners to make historically sympathetic repairs, changes and additions to their properties, and working with the City's Housing Office and the local CDC (Somerville Corporation) to identify historic property owners eligible for home improvement loans and to design housing that is both affordable and sensitive to the historic character of the overall neighborhood and the specific streetscape.
- Served as Project Manager, Preservation Commission Liaison, or Coordinator on numerous historically designated properties owned by the City which were a source of blight or poor quality facilities in their respective neighborhoods. These preservation

*and restoration projects included providing handicapped accessibility to City Hall, reconstructing the Old Powder House (circa 1704), repairing and renovating the Field House for public use, stabilizing the exterior envelope of the City's first Police Station for redevelopment, providing handicapped accessibility to and restoring the original design to the City's historic Nathan Tufts Park, undertaking critical repairs and stabilization work on both the West Somerville Branch Library and the Central Library, and preparing a Master Plan for the City's*

#### Old Police Station

The SHPC received a grant of \$90,000 from the Massachusetts Historical Commission that was matched by an additional \$292,000 from the City to undertake emergency repair and rehabilitation work on this National Register 1874 building. Over the years the building had served many different uses, beginning as the City's first dedicated police station and later providing a home for several community organizations, including the Boys and Girls Club, various veteran groups, and a martial arts club. For the past few decades the City had neglected and poorly maintained the structure and it was no longer safe or secure for occupancy. The most recent tenants had to be relocated and the City recognized that significant private reinvestment capital would be needed to properly preserve and ideally restore the key architectural elements of this historic structure.

Funds were first used to stabilize the building, including repointing and rebuilding of all exterior brick and granite, replacement of the drainage system, roof, and doors, and extensive carpentry work on various wood elements. The interior was totally cleared of surplus furniture and debris, and the exterior was power cleaned to remove decades of dirt, grime and graffiti. A City Reuse Committee was established, which selected a development team to ensure that this significant municipal property was rehabilitated and restored in accordance with the Preservation Restriction and the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*.



oldest Cemetery on Milk Row in order to provide handicapped accessibility, restore seriously threatened public monuments and gravestone markers, and preserve vital open space in a dense residential and commercial area of the community. Each of these sites had been poorly maintained in the past, which significantly compromised their safety, use and accessibility to all members of the community. All of these projects helped the City properly restore, repair, and preserve these historic public facilities for current and future use. Public meetings and hearings were held prior to any work being finalized or approved on these municipal structures.

- Completion of grant applications to various State and local agencies for critical matching funds to undertake community preservation projects, including the Milk Row Cemetery, the Bow Street Police Station, the Preservation Awards Program, Staff Support for the Preservation Commission, and Historic Structure Reports for the Powder House, the West Branch Library, and the Prospect Hill Tower.
- Developed educational materials and programs for teachers, librarians, and students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, and for local Girl and Boy Scout leaders in order to help raise awareness and appreciation of the City's historic assets, as well as to instill a greater sense of community pride among local youth of all backgrounds. Programs included a bus tour for new public school teachers and librarians, numerous neighborhood walking tours, and active involvement of local elementary and high school youth in historic preservation activities such as re-enactment events, direct teaching in the SHS Drafting and Pre-Engineering Program, and the Art Department, and classroom visits to elementary schools.
- Adoption of a local Demolition Review Ordinance to ensure that the City's significant architectural, cultural and historical resources are not hastily destroyed before alternative solutions or persons can be identified and the affected public can be part of the discussion and constructive dialogue. Intend to work closely with the Board of Aldermen and other relevant municipal departments, such as Inspectional Services, Fire, Law, Health, and Plan-

### West Branch Library

Following many years of deferred or limited maintenance by the City, this popular library has fallen into serious disrepair and deterioration both inside and outside. Constructed at the turn of the century through a grant from the Carnegie Foundation, the library lies on the periphery of the Davis Square Central Business District. The library serves not only as a wonderful repository for a diverse collection of printed and video materials, but also as a valuable resource center for people seeking employment, new career opportunities, and job re-training tools. The structure also provides daily solace to senior citizens, young families, and other citizens needing mental stimulation, protection from the weather, and an escape from loneliness and depression. It had become incumbent on the City to undertake significant repairs and stabilization work on the building in order to make it safe and weather tight for all of its patrons, who span a wide age range, from very young children to many old timers who come on a daily basis.

The extensive and long overdue work currently underway is consistent with the property's listing on both the State and National Register of Historic Places and its designation as a Local Historic District. A widely advertised Request for Designer Services Proposal was released in 2003. Through this competitive process an architectural team (TBA Architects, Inc.) was hired to prepare documents for competitive bidding of the project.

Building work currently in progress includes structural repairs to the roof and rafters; re-pointing of brick masonry walls and chimneys; rebuilding, insulating and repairing windows; patching, replacing and painting ceilings and walls; and exterior site work.

ning, to implement this ordinance and associated procedures.





## Goals and Strategies

The Historic Preservation goals and strategies add clarity and detail to the community's visions. The activities include both existing on-going projects as well as suggest additional efforts. These efforts will be lead and managed through the SHPC and support staff:

- To expand the City's Capital Improvement Program to incorporate several historically significant, yet seriously blighted structures, including the Prospect Hill Tower, Milk Row Cemetery, and the West Branch and Main Libraries.
- To eliminate blight and serious safety issues on a key public facility in West Somerville, but valuable as a community-wide resource, by undertaking significant roof, drainage, wall, and door repairs on the West Branch Library, and restoring certain irreplaceable architectural features of the interior entry, stairwell, and main room.
- To work more closely with the Staff of OHCD's Housing and Commercial Development Divisions and various non-profit organizations to encourage the use of neglected or endangered historic resources, such as former churches, the Armory, and tax title properties, for affordable housing and/or public facilities, in a historically sensitive manner. Conversion of a former theater to a community recreational facility has recently begun, following extensive public review and input.
- To devise creative strategies for helping homeowners to undertake historically appropriate repairs, additions, or changes to their architecturally or historically significant properties, when adequate funds, materials, or construction techniques are not readily available to them. These strategies are likely to include zero- or low-interest home improvement loans, connection to resource banks with surplus architectural elements, contractor referrals, and direct technical assistance when needed. Coordination and outreach has already begun with the Housing Staff, a local community development corporation (SCC), and a private group of old house owners (SOHO) related to lead paint, window repair, and vinyl siding issues.
- To significantly increase the number of properties surveyed and inventoried for historic designation on both the State and National Register of Historic Places in order to further enhance the City's ability to preserve properties of special value. This is necessary for purposes of neighborhood livability, economic development, and community revitalization.
- To provide the highest level of customer service to all residents of Somerville by enhancing public accessibility to and use of the City's historical records, procedures, and program resources, through continual expansion of the Preservation Commission's website, technical information materials, and cable television programming.
- To enhance the educational experience and relevance of the City's schools by continuing to develop curriculum materials and teacher awareness programs related to significant local history events and figures, including through the Preservation Awards Program at the Somerville High School, visits to elementary and middle school classrooms, and reenactment programs with local school children, Scouting Troops, and other youth-oriented groups.
- To increase the City's capacity to deliver historic information, records, and programs as efficiently and economically as possible by collaborating with other municipal departments and organizations with similar goals, such as the City Clerk's Office, the Library, the Bicycle Committee, the Office of Housing and Community Development, the Communications Office, and the Assessor's Office, through such projects as the Municipal Archives Advisory Committee, architectural history lectures and walking tours, Historic Bike Tours, public information brochures and educational signage regarding historic sites and assets, and GIS mapping of all historic properties in Somerville.
- To maximize the property tax revenues generated for the City by promoting and overseeing re-investment in the community's architecturally and historically significant properties that are privately owned, through continually timely, focused and courteous Staff response, and by highlighting notable people and properties that can inspire others to re-invest in their community, through articles in





local newspapers, videotaping success stories, Somerville Museum exhibits, and sponsoring the annual Preservation Awards Ceremony.

- To enhance the public image of the City and its economic development potential by organizing public events, in concert with the Mayor's Office and the Somerville Chamber of Commerce, to celebrate major historic anniversaries of the community, such as the Raising of the first Grand Union Flag at Prospect Hill in 1776 (New Year's Day), Re-enactment of the British Raid on the Old Powder House in 1775, and revisiting of the infamous Ride of Paul Revere from Boston to Concord in 1775 (now on Patriot's Day).
- To improve the City's ability to protect its historic building stock and facilities, through continued grant writing to Federal, State and other funding sources, in collaboration with other OHCD Staff and the City's Grants Administrator. Grants are in progress or are foreseen for the West Branch Library, Preservation Staff Support, the Milk Row Cemetery, Prospect Hill Tower, and Historic Interpretive Signage for the City's Bike Path and historic property owners.

All of these Work Program activities will be undertaken with a strong commitment to seeking public review and comment at all stages of plan development, and without discrimination toward anyone based upon their race, religion, national origin, sex, or age.

